

Notes on the breeding biology of several species in north-west Africa

Peter Castell

Lors de visites récentes au Maroc et aux Iles du Cap Vert, de nouvelles données ont été obtenues concernant la biologie des espèces suivantes: Ammomane élégante *Ammomanes cincturus* (description de l'oisillon), Rubiette de Moussier *Phoenicurus moussieri* (sites de nidification), Fauvette de l'Atlas *Sylvia deserticola* (description de l'oisillon), Fauvette naine *Sylvia nana* (incubation et description de l'oisillon) et Bruant striolé *Emberiza striolata* (description de l'oisillon).

During recent visits to Morocco and the Cape Verde Islands, several colleagues and I have made a number of interesting observations concerning the breeding biology of some bird species characteristic of these regions. Details of these records are presented below.

Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus*

Nestlings of this species do not appear to have been previously described. I found several nests on the island of Sal, Cape Verde Islands, in October 1998. Each was constructed within a hollow on the ground beneath and almost completely screened by an overhanging rock. The nestlings are altricial and downy, with long thick buff down on the head and upperparts. The mouth is orange-yellow, with the typical five spot markings of the lark family, ie two black spots at the rear of the tongue, one at the tip, and one at the inside tip of each mandible. Gape flanges are yellowish white.

Moussier's Redstart *Phoenicurus moussieri*

Usual nest sites for this species are on the ground, sheltered by a low bush or tussock, or in a recess in the side of a low bank or tree, and occasionally in low dense bushes 30–60 cm above ground. In late May 1999, we found c30 nests in open woodland along the coastal road north of Agadir, Morocco. Approximately half were in tree forks, typically just below 2 m above ground; many were in discarded tin cans, not only on the ground, but also up to 2 m high in bushes. One nest was constructed within a pair of trousers, which had been left hanging over a tree branch, c2 m above ground. These nests were at all stages, with eggs, small and large young, and were probably all second broods. In other parts of the country, we found nests in April, and saw many flying broods in late April.

Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola*

In April–May 1999, we found five occupied nests of this species in the Atlas Mountains, south of Midelt, southern Morocco. All were situated low (typically 50

cm) in sage bushes, and in the third quarter of April most were under construction or contained incomplete clutches. We established that incubation, which takes 13 days, commences with the next-to-last egg laid in the clutch. The role of the sexes in incubation appears to be unknown, but we saw only females incubating. Nestlings are altricial and naked at hatching. Skin is dark pink, darker on head and back. The mouth is orange-yellow. There are two distinct and elongated black markings, one at either side of the base of the tongue, with a faint dark narrow line from the tip of each, continuing along the edge of the tongue, and converging near the tip. These are joined near the base by a faint dark marking, which tapers to a point halfway down the centre of the tongue. Gape flanges are pale yellow. Both adults were feeding the resultant young in late May.

Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*

In April 1999, we found four nests of this species near Merzouga, south of Erfoud, in southern Morocco. The

1. Nestling of Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* on Sal, Cape Verde Islands, on 31 October 1998 (Peter Castell)
2. Habitat of Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola* near Midelt, southern Morocco, April 1999 (Peter Castell)
3. Nest and eggs of Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola* near Midelt, southern Morocco, April 1999 (Peter Castell)
4. Fledgling Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola*, aged c11 days, near Midelt, southern Morocco, May 1999 (Peter Castell)
5. Habitat of Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* near Merzouga, southern Morocco, April 1999 (Peter Castell)
6. Nest and eggs of Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* near Merzouga, southern Morocco, April 1999 (Peter Castell)
7. Newly hatched nestlings of House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* in southern Morocco (Peter Castell)



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area was mainly flat open desert, with slightly lower areas and wadis with scattered thick bushes. Sitting in the car at the edge of one of these bushy areas, we played a recording of the song of Desert Warbler. One (the male, we suggest, from behaviour) immediately appeared, alarm called, and perched in a bush c3 m from the car, and a second (the presumed female) appeared within a further 30 secs. As soon as the tape was stopped, both flew to two adjacent bushes, within c100 m of the car. On searching these bushes, the male flew from one, and the female was discovered incubating two eggs in a nest in the other. All four nests were c1 m above ground and well concealed in thick thorn bushes, c2 m tall. We established that incubation commences when the final egg has been laid and occupies 12 days. Clutch size is 2–3 eggs. Nestlings are altricial and naked at hatching, with

flesh-pink skin. The mouth is orange-yellow with two dark elongated markings, one on either side of the tongue. Gape flanges are pale yellow.

House Bunting *Emberiza striolata*

Nestlings of this species have not been adequately described. This is rather surprising given its relative abundance in and around human settlements in North Africa. Plate 7 depicts nestlings in southern Morocco in April 1999. They are altricial and downy, with long and dense whitish-grey down on the head and upperparts. Mouth and tongue are deep pink, the latter with prominent pale pink rear spurs, and pale yellow edges and tip. Gape flanges are whitish yellow. ♀

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African Bird Club Conservation Fund Update

• Four further conservation awards have been made since the last Bulletin

An award of UK£400 was made to Aride Island Nature Reserve, Seychelles, to produce an informative reserve guide in the local language, Creole. ABC also helped fund Tadesse Woldemariam Gole's recent attendance at the 10th Annual Conference of the Biological Society of Ethiopia, where he presented a paper on bird diversity and density in montane forests on the country's central plateau, was funded by the Club. The Albertine Rift Conservation Society has been awarded UK£1,000 towards a planned conference on Species Data Mobilisation and Sharing. The Nigerian Conservation Society was granted UK£1,000 towards a field expedition to Cross Rivers National Park, but this project has unfortunately been postponed due to funding difficulties.

• **ABC/NHBS Book Awards** These awards again attracted much interest, with four high-quality applications. Congratulations to the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone, Bureau d'Etudes Scientifiques et Techniques (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Nature Kenya (two applications) who each received UK£100 worth of books. Applications are now invited for the 2000/2001 awards. Sincere thanks are due to the Natural History Book Service for continued sponsorship of the scheme.

• **ABC Expedition Award** The first ABC Expedition Award has been won by a multi-disciplinary expedition to the Annobon, one of the Gulf of Guinea islands off the African west coast. Annobon supports internationally important seabird populations, as well as five species of passerines endemic to the Gulf of Guinea group. The expedition,

comprising Spanish and local biologists, will undertake a census of seabird populations (last performed in 1959) and research the habitat requirements of the endemic landbirds. Other members of the team will survey marine and terrestrial molluscs, and undertake botanical surveys. The deadline for applications for the 2001 ABC Expedition Award is 31 January 2001.

• **ABC at the PAOC** The 10th Pan-African Ornithological Congress (PAOC) will be held in Kampala, Uganda, in September 2000. ABC has allocated UK£2,500 to help fund African ornithologists who would otherwise be unable to attend. ABC intends to play an active role at the PAOC and a full report will be published in the next Bulletin.

For further information, see p. 7 of this bulletin. ♀